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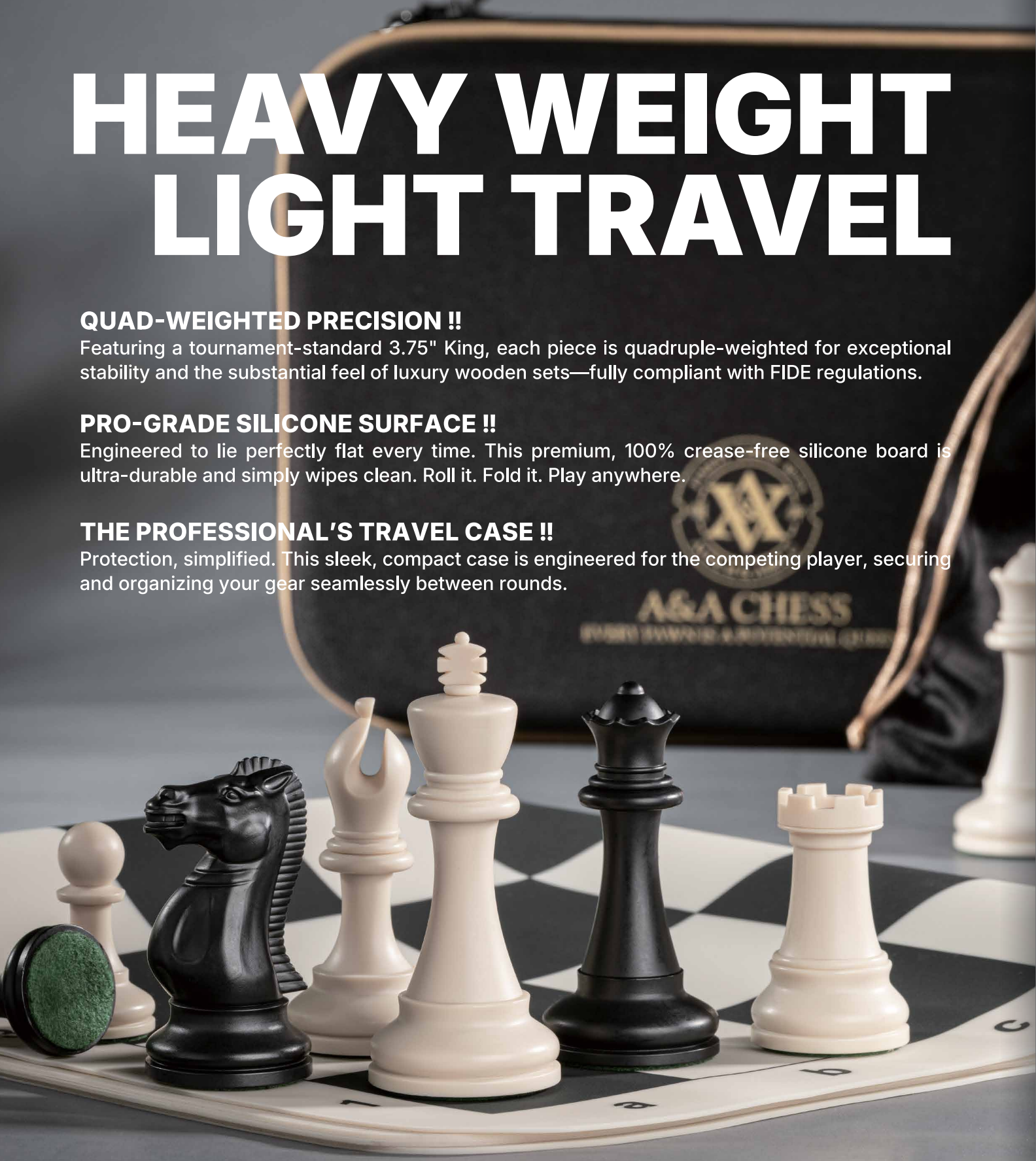
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WIJK AAN ZEE 2026 SUPERTOURNAMENT

The Hottest Stars Right Now

21-year-old Nodirbek Abdusattorov opened 2026 with a dominant 9/13 in the Masters at Wijk aan Zee, building on his late-2025 triumph at the London Chess Classic. 15-year-old American Andy Woodward captured the Challengers title, powered by a remarkable 7½/8 run in the middle rounds.

● By GM John Burke

The 2026 Tata Steel tournament took place from January 17 to February 1, and it produced very exciting chess, as usual. I would say the tournament is known for a few things that make it unique among the other annual events on the calendar. First of all, there's the history. It has gone through many iterations and name changes over the years. You might have heard it called Hoogovens, Corus, or Wijk aan Zee. They all refer to the same event, which has been held annually in one form or another since 1938. Past victors include the world champions Euwe, Petrosian, Spassky, Botvinnik, Tal, Karpov, Kasparov, Anand, Kramnik, and Carlsen.



▲ Nodirbek Abdusattorov Photo by Lennart Ootes

ABDUSATTOROV TRIUMPHS IN WIJK AAN ZEE MASTERS

Nodirbek Abdusattorov has come close to winning this tournament before, and this time he finally went all the way. I would describe him as a highly practical player: he manages his time well and consistently poses unique problems for his opponents. Even when an objective defense exists, the practical challenges are often overwhelming. A perfect example comes from a critical win in the penultimate round.

See Page 8



WOODWARD CLAIMS WIJK AAN ZEE CHALLENGERS

Andy Woodward's performance was a barnburner. He lost two games but won nine (!), including a stretch of 7½/8 in the middle of the tournament. Not to get too far ahead of myself, but it reminded me a bit of Arjun Erigaisi's performance in the 2022 Challengers group, where he similarly walloped the field. He, of course, went on to become an elite player and eventually crossed 2800.

I was especially impressed by Andy's positional control in many of his victories. It often felt as though he cruised to wins without his opponents making any outright mistakes, in a Capablanca-like fashion. His game against Oro is a perfect example.

See Page 12

◀ Andy Woodward Photo by Lennart Ootes



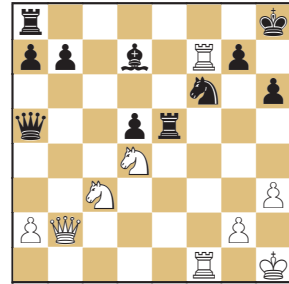
The Hottest Stars Right Now

By GM John Burke

There is also the length of the tournament – I can't think of a single other round-robin event these days that runs for 13 rounds. Finally, the fields are always excellent. The organizers consistently invite a mix of established elite players and rising youngsters. There are also two separate groups – a Masters group and a Challengers group – giving further opportunities to players who may not yet belong to the elite but have a great deal of talent and are searching for a breakthrough.

Nodirbek Abdusattorov	2751
Matthias Bluebaum	2679

Tata Steel Masters, Wijk aan Zee 2026

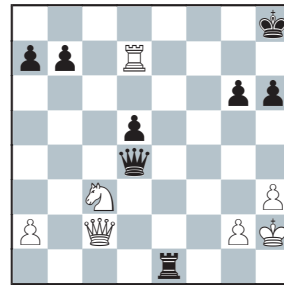


Black is up two pawns but has to fend off a dangerous attack. White's pieces are active, with particularly strong control over the dark squares. The immediate threat is $\text{E}1\text{x}f6$, removing the defender of the d7 bishop.

31...c7? This loses. Black had a couple of decent options, focused on breaking White's coordination rather than playing strictly defensively. $31...c8$ $32.dce2$ is also okay, but it looks a little unnatural to drive White's knight toward f4 and then g6.

I strongly prefer $31...c5!$, since it introduces the idea of $...e7$, trading off

the annoying rook on f7. $32.E1\text{x}f6$ The entire following line is forced from here on. ($32.dce2$ $Ee7$) $32...Ee1+$ ($32...gxf6?$ runs into $33.Wd2+-$, threatening $Wxh6+$ and $Exd7$.) $33.h2$ $Wxd4$ $34.Ef8+$ $Exf8$ $35.Exf8+$ $h7$ $36.c2+$ $g6$ $37.Ef7+$ $h8$ $38.Exd7$



Black now has a perpetual, but nothing more than that. $38...g1+$ $39.h3$ $Wg3$ $Wg3+$ ($39...Ee3+$ Black can also force White to deliver a perpetual. $40.h4$ $Wg1!$ $41.Ed8+$ $h7$ $42.Eg8+$ $h8$ $43.Wxg6+$ $h6$ $44.Wxh6+$ $h8$ $45.Wh5+$ $h6$ $46.Wh6+$) $40.h2$ $Wg1+=$.

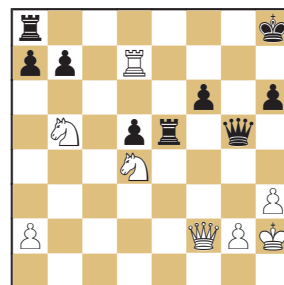
32.hb5! Now the blows start coming – $E1\text{x}f6$ is next in most variations.

$32...c4$ $32...d8$ $33.hc6$ $bxc6$ $34.Wxe5$ $cx5$ $35.E1\text{x}f6$ $gxf6$ $36.Exf6+-$.

33.E1\text{x}f6! $gxf6$ **34.Wf2** Bringing the queen into the attack and stopping $...f1+$.

After $34.Exd7?$ $Wf1+$ $35.h2$ $Eg8$, Black gets a lot of play.

34...c1+ **35.h2** $Wg5$ **36.Exd7**



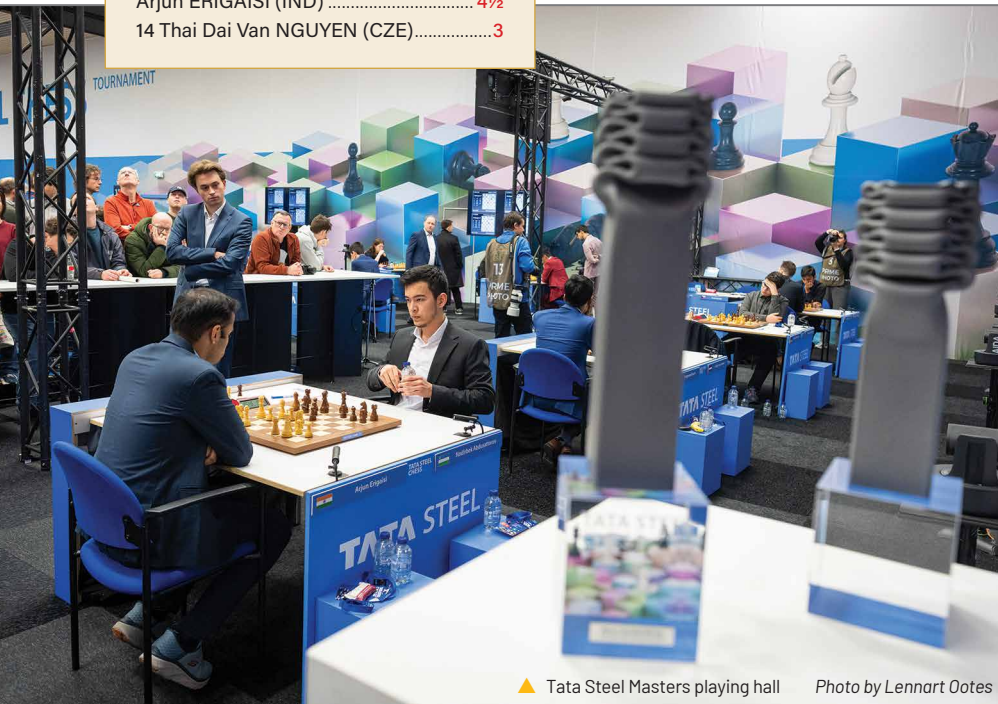
John Burke was the 2020 US Junior Champion. In 2015 he broke the record as youngest player ever to surpass 2600+ ELO. Notable victories include the 2018 U.S. Masters, 2018 New York Championship, and 2019 Washington Open.

TATA STEEL MASTERS

(14-player round-robin)

Wijk Aan Zee, The Netherlands, January 17 – February 1, 2026

1 Nodirbek ABDUSATTOROV (UZB).....	9
2 Javokhir SINDAROV (UZB).....	8½
3-5 Hans NIEMANN (USA), Vincent KEYMER (GER), Jordan VAN FOREEST (NED).....	7½
6-7 Yagiz Kaan ERDOGMUS (TUR), Matthias BLUEBAUM (GER).....	7
8-10 GUKESH D (IND), Anish GIRI (NED), Vladimir FEDOSEEV (SLO).....	6½
11 PRAGNANANDHAA R (IND).....	5½
12-13 Aravindh CHITHAMBARAM (IND), Arjun ERIGAISI (IND).....	4½
14 Thai Dai Van NGUYEN (CZE).....	3



Tata Steel Masters playing hall Photo by Lennart Ootes



Tata Steel Masters playing hall Photo by Lennart Ootes

Now White has a favorable material imbalance, plus a raging attack.

36...Ee4 **37.hd6** Easiest, cashing in material due to the threat of $h7+$.

37...We5+ **38.g3** $Wxd4$ **39.hxe4** $Wxf2+$ **39...Wxe4** **40.Wxf6+** $h8$ **41.Wg7** mate.

40.hxf2 $Ec8$ **41.Exb7** $Ec2$ **42.hg1** $Exa2$ **43.hg4** **Black resigned**

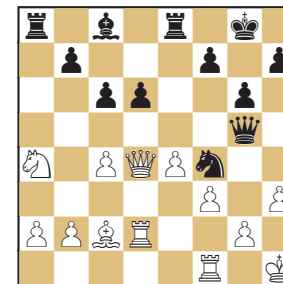
There was only one player within striking distance of Abdusattorov, and it was none other than his compatriot Javokhir Sindarov. He finished just half a point behind and went undefeated throughout the tournament. These two are set to carry Uzbekistani chess for many years to come.

Sindarov's beautiful and unique sacrifice – coincidentally also against Bluebaum – was one of my favorite games of the event.

Matthias Bluebaum **2679**

Javokhir Sindarov **2726**

Tata Steel Masters, Wijk aan Zee 2026



The d6 pawn is under attack, but activity is far more important.

21...Wh6! A beautiful idea. Sindarov is not aiming for subtlety; he goes straight for the white king.

$21...e6$ is a calmer move, connecting rooks. White cannot take the pawn here: $22.Wxd6??$ $Ead8$ $23.Wb4$ $h3$ $24.Exd8$

$Wxd8$ $25.gxh3$ $Ee2$ $26.Eg1$ $Wh6$ $27.Eg3$ $hx3+-$.

22.Wxd6?? $Ead8$ $23.Wb4$ $h3$ $24.Exd8$

$Wxd8$ $25.gxh3$ $Ee2$ $26.Eg1$ $Wh6$ $27.Eg3$ $hx3+-$.

22.Wxd6 $hx3!$ **23.gxh3** $Ee6$ Black's knight on f4 is such a monster, and there is always a perpetual check with $...Wh3+$, so there is no need to commit anything yet. White has to find the right square for his queen, which he fails to do.

24.Wc5?? This is by far the most natural move, preparing to bring the queen back to f2 or g1, but it loses. That is a sign of a good sacrifice – when your opponent's most obvious move is a mistake.

$24.Wd7!$ is the most accurate.

$24...Wh3+$ $25.hg1$

Here Black cannot play $...Ee5$, which is one of the advantages of the white queen being on d7. $25...Wg3+$ $26.h1$ Black has nothing more than a draw. Attempts to get the rook on e6 involved do not work. $26...g5?$ $27.Eh2$ White covers the h-file, and Black has nothing. $27...Eh6$ $28.Wd2+-$.

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24...hd3!! An absolutely brilliant idea! It is easy to miss, since one naturally assumes that Black will simply play $...Wh3+$. The point is to distract the rook on d2 and drag it away from the second rank.

25.Exd3 $25...Exd3$ $Wxd2+-$.

25...Wh3+ **26.hg1** $Wg3+$ **27.h1 g5** And just like that, the threat of $...Eh6$ mate forces resignation.

White resigned

AMERICANS IN WIJK AAN ZEE

Three American players participated in this year's event, and I'll mostly focus on their games and results. In the Masters group, Hans Niemann finished in joint third with $7\frac{1}{2}/13$ – a very solid result.

It's no accident that he has become one of the most popular figures in the chess world. While some factors have been out of his control, I think people are drawn to his style, which regularly produces very non-standard games. I didn't have space to include it in this article, but if you get the chance, check out his victory against Nguyen from round 11 – it's a very unusual game in which he fought against his opponent's pawn avalanche.

Below, I annotated Hans's victory against Aravindh Chithambaram. Aravindh had a somewhat tough tournament here, but he's a strong Indian player who has had an excellent couple of years, even if he may not be as well known as some of his compatriots.

A34

Aravindh Chithambaram **2700**

Hans Niemann **2725**

Tata Steel Masters, Wijk aan Zee 2026

1.hf3 $hf6$ **2.g3** $c5$ **3.hg2** $hc6$ **4.c4** **d5** $5.cxd5$ $hd5$ **6.hc3**

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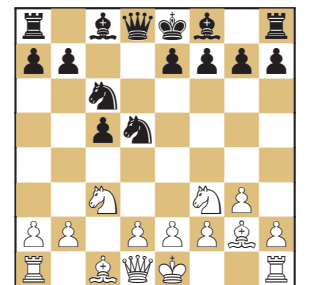
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opening, but in fact it is the main line. The point is to avoid the knight trade and then set up a sort of Maroczy Bind as Black by playing ...e5 next.

6...e5? is a blunder, allowing a common tactical pattern that is very important to know. 7.♖xe5! ♗xc3 8.♗xc6 ♖xd1 9.♗xd8 ♗xf2 10.♗xf7 Both sides can play the desperado game, but eventually White comes out on top.

7.0-0 e5 8.a3 White is trying to play b2-b4 here, which might look like a pawn sacrifice, but is in fact tactically justified since Black has not castled yet.

8...♖b8 A somewhat mysterious move. However, the logic becomes clear when considering White's idea of b2-b4.

The most natural 8...♗e7 appears to be somewhat inaccurate. 9.b4! Now White achieves this break, and after 9...cxb4 10.axb4 ♗xb4? 11.♗xe5! ♗xe5 12.♖a4+ ♗c6 13.♗xc6+ bxc6 14.♖xb4, he wins the piece back with a great position.

9.d3 9.b4 does not work here. 9...cxb4 10.axb4 ♗xb4 11.♗xe5 ♗xe5 12.♖a4+ ♗c6 13.♗xc6+ bxc6 The rook on b8 defends the bishop on b4 – the entire point of Black's play.

Most players prefer 9.♖b1, renewing the idea of b2-b4.

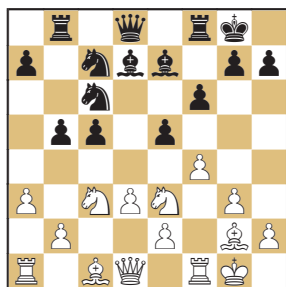
9...♗e7 10.♗d2 A typical maneuver. Rerouting the knight to c4 adds pressure against the e5 pawn.

10...♗d7 11.♗c4 f6 12.f4 If White fails to achieve anything active, Black will have a comfortable position with more space, so Aravindh uses a pawn break to strike at Black's center.

12...b5 Definitely the best move. Black does not want to take on f4 and activate the opponent's dark-squared bishop, nor allow fxe5 under favorable circumstances for White.

12...0-0 13.fxe5 fxe5 14.♗e3± Black's isolated pawn on e5 promises White a risk-free advantage.

13.♗e3 0-0



14.f5?! This is basically a positional



▲ Hans Niemann vs. Gukesh D.

Photo by Lennart Ootes

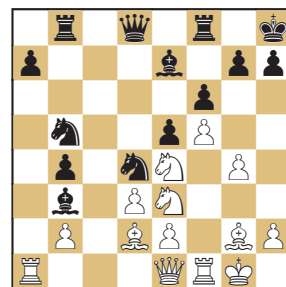
error that kills the pawn tension and gives Black a free hand to pursue queenside play. Such a move is often connected with a kingside attack, for example with h2-h4 and g4-g5, but White is not quite equipped to execute it here.

14...♗d4 15.g4 ♖h8 A sensible prophylactic move, so Black never has to worry about checks on the diagonal.

16.♗d2 ♗e8! The bishop on d7 is not doing much, so it should go to f7, where it exerts more influence on the queenside and can possibly aid in the king's defense in the future. For example, imagine a scenario in which White is threatening checkmate on h7 – Black's bishop would then be able to drop back to g8 and everything would be secure.

17.♗e4 ♗f7 18.♗c3?! This walks right into a pawn attack, facilitating Black's queenside play.

18...b4 19.axb4 cxb4 20.♗d2 ♗b3 21.♖e1 ♗cb5



It's clear that things have gone very

wrong for White: Black's queenside play is rolling, while White has not even begun to hint at counterplay of his own.

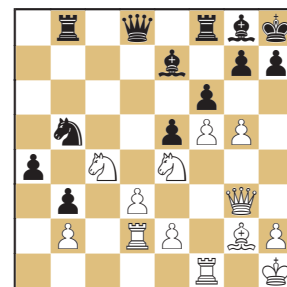
22.♖c1 22.♗xb4 ♗xb4 23.♖xb4 is not a free pawn, because of 23...♗xe2+ 24.♖f2 ♗bd4.

22...♗g8 The path is clear, and the plan is clear. Black will use his 2-vs-1 queenside pawn majority to create a passed pawn, and it is up to White to muddy the waters.

23.♖d1 a5 24.♖h1 ♗b3 There are many approaches, but I really like this one – we simply snatch the bishop so we don't have to worry about pressure on the b4 pawn once we push ...a5-a4.

25.♗c4 ♗xd2 26.♖xd2 b3 27.♖g3 Finally White has some inkling of counterplay, with g4-g5 coming next. The problem is that Black is very solid and has no need to react.

27...a4 28.g5



28...a3! No fear whatsoever. g5-g6 does not threaten anything, and gxf6 is similarly a dead end.

29.e3 In the case of 29.gxf6 gxf6

30.♗g1, 30...♗b4 is not the only move, but it is the cleanest – gaining a tempo on the rook and clearing the way for ...♖e7, defending the g7 square. 31.♗f3 ♖e7 32.♖dd1 Now both ...axb2 and ...a3-a2 would win.

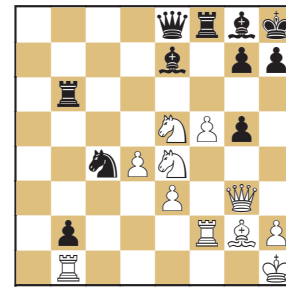
29...fxg5 A slightly surprising choice, as it is not entirely clear why Black needs to change the pawn structure, but this is still totally winning. White gets his knight to e5, but the activity ends there.

30.♗xe5 ♖b6 A useful move, reinforcing the sixth rank against any ♗g6+ tricks.

31.bxa3 ♗xa3 32.♖b2 ♖e8 33.d4 ♗c4 34.♖bb1 34.♗xc4 ♗xc4 Trading off White's most active piece makes Black's job easier – now he can proceed with ...♗a3, kicking the rook, and/or ...♖c8, targeting the f5 pawn.

34...b2 34...♗xe5 35.dxe5 There is no need to allow White these nice connected pawns, although even here Black should still be winning.

35.♖f2



35...♖c8! Very accurate – attacking f5 and eyeing ...♖c1 check in some lines. But doesn't this walk into a pin?

36.♖c2 36.♗xc4 ♖xc4 37.♖fb2 ♖xb2 38.♖xb2 ♖c1++.

36...♗xe5! All seen in advance – the b2 pawn is a huge asset that justifies the queen sacrifice.

37.♖xc8 ♖xc8 White now has to scramble to stop ...♖c1+.

38.♗c5 38.dxe5 ♖c1+ 39.♗f1 ♖xb1+.

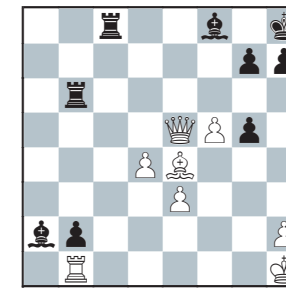
38...♗xc5 39.♗e4! A really good practical try, reinforcing the rook on b1. The point is that White leaves open the option of taking the knight on e5 with either the queen or the pawn, depending on what Black does.

Unfortunately for Aravindh, Hans still has his choice of wins.

39.dxe5 ♗f8 40.♗e4 ♗a2 41.♖g2 ♖c1+; or 39.♖xe5 ♗d6 40.♖e4 ♗a2+.

39...♗c4 A normal move like 39...♗f8?

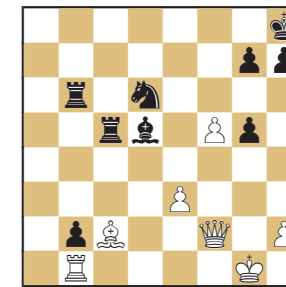
suddenly puts the win totally in doubt after 40.♖xe5! ♗a2



41.♖g2! The difference compared to some previous variations is that White's queen on e5 is active, so if Black plays ...♖c1, he has to reckon with back-rank problems after ♖e8. It is not at all clear if Black can win here.

40.dxc5 ♖xc5 Black's perfectly coordinated pieces plus the monster b2 pawn should win, as long as he takes care of his king.

41.♖f2 ♗d6 42.♗c2 ♗d5+ 43.♖g1



43...♗e4 The final assault – the knight is heading to c3, which will compel White to go for a last-ditch attack against Black's king.

44.♖e2 44.♗xe4 ♗xe4 45.♖xb2 ♖c1+.

44...♗c3 45.♖d3 ♗xb1 46.f6 Mate threat!

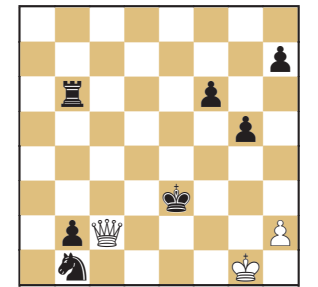
46...♖xc2 The bishop is taken, and all that remains to calculate is that White does not have a perpetual.

47.♖xd5 gxf6 What follows is a long variation of White chasing Black's king, but such lines are usually not that difficult since they are quite linear and involve only moves by White's queen and Black's king. I have no doubt that Hans had essentially worked this all out before he played 45...♗xb1.

48.♖d8+ ♖g7 49.♖e7+ ♗xb6 Who cares about this rook? 49...♗c3+.

49...♖g6 50.♖e8+ 50.♖e4+ ♖h6 51.♖xc2 ♗c3+.

50...♖f5 51.♖d7+ ♖e4 52.♖d4+ ♖f3 53.♖d1+ ♖xe3 54.♖xc2

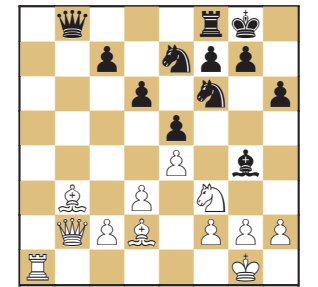


54...♗d2! 55.♖c5+ ♖e2 A nice finish. The king finds shelter after 56.♖e7+ ♖d1, so **White resigned.**

I also have to back up my claim that Hans's chess is absolute cinema to watch, since his battle against the World Champion Gukesh was one of the strangest games between elite players I've seen in quite some time.

Hans Niemann	2725
Gukesh D.	2754

Tata Steel Masters, Wijk aan Zee 2026



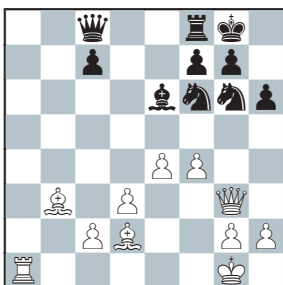
It is an equal position, and Hans came up with a move that almost no one would consider.

21.♗xe5? I applaud the imagination, but the move is bad. It is just bad. I wish I could say something else, but I cannot. So what is the idea? It is a positional sacrifice: White gives up a piece for two pawns. He then gets a nice pawn mass on the kingside and can try to push f4-f5 or e4-e5 later. The dark-squared bishop will go to c3 and work in tandem with the bishop on b3. Black's minor pieces will also be temporarily loose. All of this is well and good, but in the middlegame the extra minor piece is still far too much.

21...dxe5 22.♖xe5 ♗g6 23.♖g3 There are some ideas here for White: ♗c3 followed by ♗xf6, or trying to kick Black's bishop away and play ♖xg6 using the pin. However, Black has

multiple ways to deal with this, none of which are particularly difficult to find. **23...c5** Very natural and straightforward, offering a queen trade.

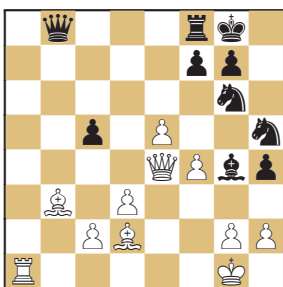
The most accurate was **23...c8!**, adding protection to the g4 bishop as well as the e6 square, which becomes relevant on the next move. **24.f4** (**24.♗c3 ♗e6 25.♗xf6 gxf6--**) **24...♗e6**



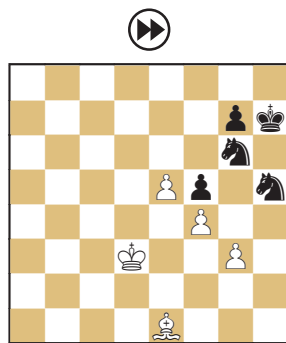
A) 25.♗xe6 ♗xe6 26.f5 ♗b6+ More natural is **...♗e5** which leads to a slightly better endgame for Black, but this is the maximalist approach. **27.♗e3 ♗b2 28.♗e1 ♖e5 29.♗xh6 ♖h5--**

B) 25.f5 ♗xb3 26.cxb3 ♗d7 The threat of **...♗d4+** is a nice tempo-gaining idea. It may be hard to spot from afar, but it is not the only move that maintains Black's advantage. **27.♗c3** (After **27.♗e1 ♖e7 28.♗xh6 ♖h5 29.♗g4 ♗d6 30.♗xh5 gxf6--**, White has three pawns for a piece, but they are not very impressive, and the b3 and d3 pawns stand out as weaknesses.) **27...♗c6! 28.♗b2 ♖e7** Now the knight on f6 is defended.

24.f4 h5! A really nice find. **25.e5 h4 26.♗e3 ♖h5 27.♗e4**



27...♗c8! Great calculation – it turns out that **♗xg6** does not work for White. **28.♗a4 28.♗xg6 c4! 29.♗xc4 ♗xc4 30.♗xg4 ♗d4++**. **28...♗f5** With the light-square blockade in place, it is clear that White's sacrifice has backfired. Let's skip ahead to the critical moment in the endgame.



Black has an extra piece for a pawn, and the f5 pawn does a good job of restricting White's king. There is only one danger for Black: if all the pawns get traded, the two knights are not sufficient mating material.

41...♖hxf4+? A totally unnecessary piece sacrifice. I can only assume that Gukesh was afraid of the white king coming to f3, followed by g3-g4, but it's not hard to see that the two knights can coordinate afterward.

41...♗g8 is the logical plan – bring the king around, remove the knight from g6, play the pawn to g6, and then play **...♖g7**. Once both knights are free, it's just a matter of time. **42.♗e3 ♖e7 43.♗f3 g6 44.g4 ♖g7--** What could possibly go wrong for Black here? I really don't get it. The knight will sit on e6 and blockade everything, and then Black's king and the other knight have all the time in the world to get active and win the game. This is definitely a case of getting in one's own head.

42.gxf4 ♖xf4+ 43.♗d4 It's an unusual endgame now – still very difficult to defend for White, but a draw with best play. Hans made one later mistake that was not punished, which is understandable given the complexity of this endgame. Eventually, the game ended in a **draw** on move 63.

CHALLENGERS

Moving on to the Challengers section, the two Americans competing there were Andy Woodward and Carissa Yip, and both performed extraordinarily well. Andy finished in first place and earned a spot in the Masters group next year, while Carissa scored 7/13 with a 2579 performance rating, coming close to a GM norm and gaining a heap of rating points along the way.

TATA STEEL CHALLENGERS

(14-player round-robin)

Wijk Aan Zee, The Netherlands
January 17 – February 1, 2026

1 Andy WOODWARD (USA)	10
2 Vasyi IVANCHUK (UKR)	9½
3 Aydin SULEYMANLI (AZE)	9
4 Marcandria MAURIZZI (FRA)	8
5 Bibisara ASSAUBAYEVA (KAZ)	7½
6-7 Faustino ORO (ARG), Carissa YIP (USA)	7
8 Max WARMERDAM (NED)	6½
9 Velimir IVIC (SRB)	6
10 Daniil YUFFA (ESP)	5½
11 Erwin LAMI (NED)	5
12 Vedant PANESAR (IND)	4
13 Miaoyi LU (CHN)	3½
14 Eline ROEBERS (NED)	2½

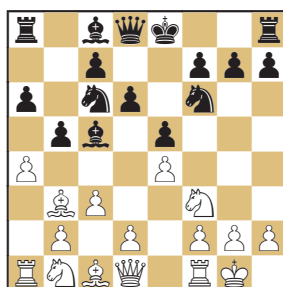
Just to reinforce my earlier point about how much I love the fields at this tournament: the Challengers section featured 56-year-old legend Vasyi Ivanchuk and 12-year-old Argentine prodigy Faustino Oro. How cool is it that these two were able to play in the same event?

C78

Faustino Oro	2516
Andy Woodward	2608

Tata Steel Challengers, Wijk aan Zee 2026

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♖c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♖f6 5.0-0 ♗c5 The Archangelsk variation of the Ruy Lopez tends to lead to exciting games, as White generally needs to play c2-c3 and d2-d4 to try for an advantage, building a strong center. The fight then revolves around White's ability to maintain that center amid Black's active pieces. **6.c3 b5 7.♗b3 d6 8.a4**



8...♗b7 The alternative is **...♗b8**, keeping **...♗g4** as an option in some lines.

9.d3 With Black's bishop on b7, there



▲ Andy Woodward

Photo by Lennart Ootes

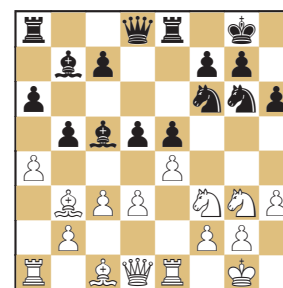
is a strong argument for White to play d2-d3 rather than d2-d4 in most Ruy Lopez structures. In a sense, the bishop on b7 is now "biting on granite," with the e4 pawn well reinforced.

9...h6 Stopping **♗g5** is a worthwhile investment of a tempo.

After **9...0-0 10.♗g5**, the pin is extremely irritating. For example, **10...h6 11.♗h4 g5 12.♖xg5!** This typical sacrifice works well here. **12...hxg5 13.♗xg5** With **♗f3** coming, Black will struggle mightily to untangle.

10.♗e1 If White wants to pose serious problems, normally **10.♖h4** is the way to do it. It's a slightly unusual idea, but since Black's bishop is not on c8, the f5 square becomes a nice target.

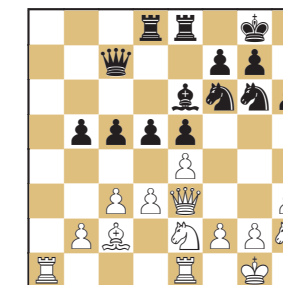
10...0-0 11.h3 ♖e7 12.♖bd2 ♖g6 If Black is able to complete development and reroute his knight in this way, he normally achieves full equality, and this position is no exception. **13.♖f1 ♗e8 14.♖g3 d5**



Black gets the central break in first, and White should seriously consider trading everything off and equalizing.

♖xe4 24.♗xe4 f5 It looks scary to allow Black's pawns to roll, but in fact White is fine. After **25.♗c2**, White can always meet **...e5-e4** with **♖d4**.

21...♗c7 22.♖e2 ♗e6 23.♖h2



Things have clearly gone wrong for White, and now Black's space advantage will begin to tell.

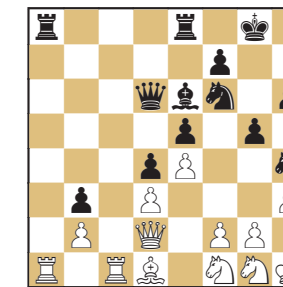
23...d4 24.cxd4 cxd4 25.♗d2 ♗a8 White's key pawn break in this position is f2-f4, but it is difficult to arrange, and in fact White never manages it for the rest of the game.

26.♗ec1 ♗d6 27.♖f1 Black's advantage is clear, based on his extra space and superior bishop, but how should he continue? Andy first decides to put the kibosh on White's f4 break, so he doesn't have to worry about it and can focus on his own plans.

27...♖h4 Threatening **...♗xh3** because of the fork on f3.

28.♖h1 g5 Now Black is free to improve his position at a relaxed pace. His kingside has been slightly weakened, but the squares are well covered, and White lacks the activity to take advantage of it, so it is hardly a concern.

29.♗d1 b4 30.♖g1 b3



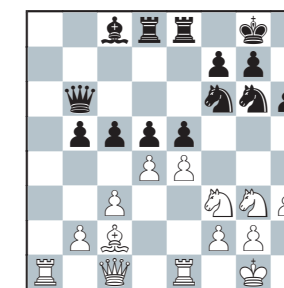
The pawn has gone as far as it can and has created an invasion square on a2. This is an important concept when two rooks are contesting an open file – each side looks for chances to gain ground. Here, Black has the idea of playing **...♗a2** soon.

15.♗e3?! After this move, White is condemned to a slightly worse and passive position.

It was time for White to pull the brakes with **15.axb5 axb5 16.♗xa8 ♗xa8 17.exd5 ♗xd5 18.♖e4=**.

15...♗xe3 16.♗xe3 c5 Now Black has central control and total flexibility – at the right moment he can break the tension with **...c5-c4**, **...d5-d4**, or **...dxe4**. **17.♗c2 ♗b6 18.♗e1 ♗ad8 19.♗c1 ♗c8** I mentioned earlier that the bishop on b7 often ends up wishing it could return to its starting square. This move may seem strange, but there is logic to it, as the bishop on e6 will also be well placed.

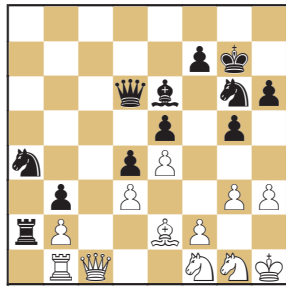
20.axb5 axb5 21.♗e3 In hindsight, **21.d4!** was White's chance to break out. With the bishop still on b7, this normally would not work, but now is the opportunity. Some calculation is required, but the reward is achieving equality, so it's worth it.



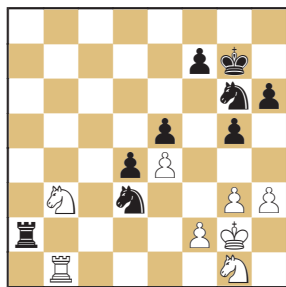
A) 21...cxd4 22.cxd4 dxe4 23.♖xe5 ♖xe4 24.dxe5 ♗xe5 25.♖xe4=

B) 21...dxe4 22.dxc5 ♗xc5 23.♖xe4

31.♖a5 ♖d7 The knight on f6 is not doing much, so changing course and maneuvering toward c5 is logical, attacking White's d3 pawn.
 32.♖ca1 ♖xa5 33.♗xa5 ♖c5 34.♙e2 ♖g6 35.♖c1 ♖c8 36.g3 ♗g7 Slow improvement is the way to go for Black. Now ...♖b7 is a serious idea, trading off the last pair of rooks and clearing the way for the minor pieces to invade and finish White off.
 37.♖a1 ♖c6 38.♗d2 ♖a6 39.♗c1 ♖a2 Invasion square!
 40.♖b1 ♖a4



White is now totally lost, as the b2 pawn is indefensible in the long run. All Black has to do is trade queens, which is pretty easy to arrange.
 41.♖d2 ♗c5 42.♗xc5 ♖xc5 The knight will return to a4.
 43.♗g2 43.♙d1 ♖xd3+-.
 43...♖a4 44.♙d1 44.♙g4 offers slightly more resistance. 44...♙xg4 45.hxg4 ♖xb2 46.♖g3 ♖xd3 47.♖xb3 Here White manages to capture on b3 with the rook instead of the knight, which is an improvement, but in the long run Black's extra protected passed pawn should decide. 47...♖c5 48.♖b5 ♖c2+-.
 44...♖xb2 45.♙xb3 ♙xb3 46.♖xb3 ♖xd3

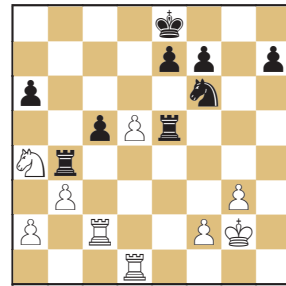


In addition to being a pawn down, White is badly uncoordinated and must constantly watch the f2 pawn.
 47.♖f1 ♖b2 48.♖a5 ♖c2 49.♖f3 ♖c5 50.♖e1 f6 51.♗g1 h5 52.♖h2 d3 53.♗g2 ♖xe4 A nice finish - if ♖xe4,

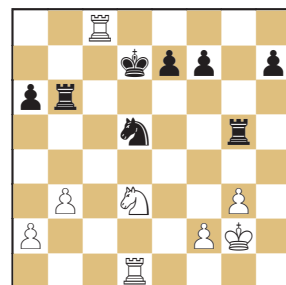
then ...d2 follows and promotion cannot be stopped, so **White resigned**.
 His victory in the final round against experienced Dutch GM Erwin L'Ami clinched the title. You might have expected some nerves under the circumstances, but he closed it out like someone who has been in that position hundreds of times before.

Andy Woodward	2608
Erwin L'Ami	2632

Tata Steel Challengers, Wijk aan Zee 2026

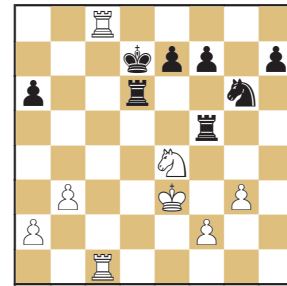


Here's an interesting exercise in defending slightly worse positions - how should Black capture on d5?
 33...♖xd5? Now White keeps both rooks on the board and generates a lot of activity.
 33...♖xd5! It is important for Black to trade a pair of rooks. 34.♖xd5 ♖xd5 35.♖xc5 (35.♖xc5 ♖b5) 35...♖b6 With only one pair of rooks left, Black's weak a6 and h7 pawns are less of a problem, and he should be able to hold the line here.
 34.♖xc5 ♖b6 35.♖d3! Perhaps L'Ami overlooked this move - ♖c8+ comes next and White's pieces unleash a heap of headaches on Black's scattered army.
 35...♖g5 35...♖f5! would put up more resistance, since Andy would not have the same tempo attacking the f7 pawn like in the game.
 36.♖c8+ ♖d7



37.♖f8! Now Black is being stretched

too thin, having to deal with the f7 pawn, a potential pin on the d-file, and ♖c5+ in many lines.
 37...♖d6 38.♖c5+ ♖c7 39.♖c1 A simple way to win, avoiding any tricks with ...♖f4+ or ...♖e3+, with could come with a discovered attack on the rook on d1.
 39...♖f4+ 40.♖f3 ♖g6 41.♖e4+ ♖d7 42.♖fc8 It is far too early to cash in with 42.♖xg5?, since White cannot then take the f7 pawn. 42...♖xf8 43.♖xf7?? ♖f6+-+.
 42...♖f5+ 43.♖e3



43...♖d1 The final error, losing material by force, though the position was already dire.
 43...♖b6 44.♖1c7+ ♖e6 45.♖c6+ ♖xc6 46.♖xc6+ ♖d7 47.♖xa6+- The two conected passed pawns should win the game.
 44.♖1c7+ ♖e6 45.♖c6+ ♖d7 45...♖e5 46.f4+-+.
 46.♖c5+ ♖xc5 47.♖xc5 ♖e5 48.♖c1 **Black resigned**
 An absolutely convincing win for Andy - it never seemed in doubt.

Carissa played many excellent games as well, but my favorite was her win against GM Max Warmerdam of the Netherlands. Her very creative play paid off, as her opponent was unable to find the accurate path to survival.

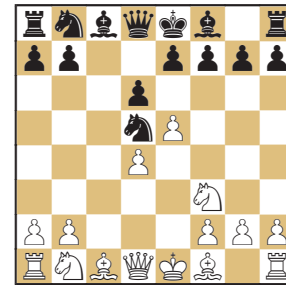
B22

Carissa Yip	2466
Max Warmerdam	2576

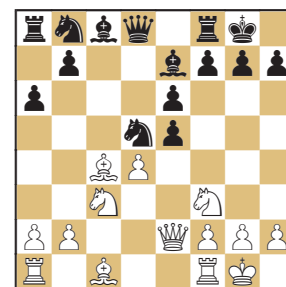
Tata Steel Challengers, Wijk aan Zee 2026

1.e4 c5 2.c3 I think the Alapin is an underrated choice against the Sicilian, especially as a surprise weapon. It is just as testing as any other line, and most Sicilian players won't be as well prepared for it compared to the sharp main lines. Black has several good replies, but in general White can

maintain control. White tries to establish a strong pawn center, so the opening has a sound positional foundation, yet there is often dynamic potential as well.
 2...♖f6 3.e5 ♖d5 4.♖f3 d6 5.d4 cxd4 6.cxd4



6...e6 This is one of Black's most solid variations. He does not immediately challenge White's center, instead completing development smoothly.
 6...♖c6 is a more direct attempt to equalize. 7.♙c4 ♖b6 8.♙b5 dxe5 9.♖xe5 ♙d7 Thousands of games have been played from here, and White's chances for an advantage revolve around creating concrete problems before Black manages to develop and castle. In general, Black is considered to be fine.
 7.♙c4 ♙e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.♗e2 a6 A slightly rare choice. Usually Black prefers 9...b6, preparing to fianchetto the bishop, or the natural developing move 9...♖c6.
 10.♖c3 After 10.♖d1, the point of Black's 9th move is 10...b5. For example, after 11.♙xd5 exd5 12.♖c3 ♙e6, Black is more than fine.
 10...dxe5

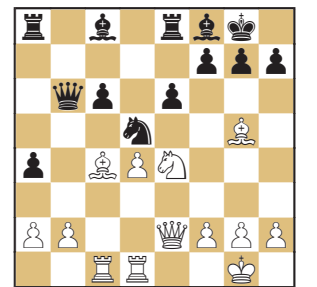


White now faces an interesting positional choice.
 11.♖xe5 11.dxe5 seems more consistent with White's typical plan in this variation of the Alapin. The e5 pawn serves as a useful anchor for White's kingside play. 11...♖xc3 12.bxc3 ♙d7 White's pawn structure is worse, but there is significant dynamic potential with ♙d3



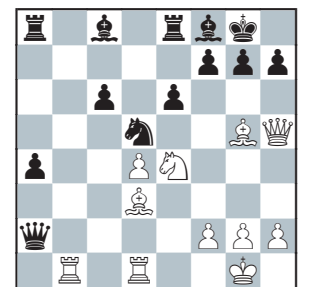
▲ Carissa Yip Photo by Lennart Ootes

and kingside activity.
 11...♖c6 12.♖xc6 bxc6 We reach a common permutation of the isolated queen's pawn structure. Black's pawns on a6 and c6 are split, but in return he gains the open b-file and additional reinforcement of the d5 knight. White, on the other hand, has the c5 square as a potential outpost. In my experience, the assets on both sides largely balance out, and it is often difficult to make concrete progress.
 13.♖d1 a5 14.♖a4 This move eyes the c5 square and also restrains Black's a-pawn. If allowed, Black would like to play ...a4, gaining space and perhaps eventually shedding the weak pawn.
 14...♙d6 15.♖c5 ♖e8 15...e5 is also worth considering. Black seizes the opportunity to alter the pawn structure and free the c8 bishop. 16.♖e4 ♙b8 This is slightly preferable to ...♙c7, as it leaves open the option of ...♗b6 or ...♗c7. 17.dxe5 ♙xe5=
 16.♖e4 ♙f8 17.♙g5 ♗b6 Black's position appears rock-solid, and it is hard to imagine his king coming under serious fire, with no obvious weaknesses and a bishop on f8 standing guard. And yet, that is precisely what will happen.
 18.♖ac1 a4



19.♗h5! Going straight for it, completely ignoring the pawn on b2. I absolutely love this move. Objectively it may be a bluff, but as bluffs go, they don't get much better than this.
 19...♙a6?! Now White's idea works perfectly.
 19...♗xb2! This is absolutely the correct move, but it requires some all-star calculation to reach that conclusion. In fact, I think this position would make an excellent exercise even for titled players. There is a lot for Black to worry about: his queen risks being trapped, and White has strong attacking

ideas. One key theme is ♙xd5 followed by ♖f6+, opening lines against the king. Various rook lifts loom. The main reason Black can stay afloat is that the queen on b2 does a fantastic job of disrupting White's coordination. Rook lifts become difficult with the queen entrenched deep in White's camp, and White's king lacks luft, so back-rank mates may become a serious concern later on.
 20.♖b1 Chasing the queen is the most consistent continuation. (20.♙xd5? doesn't work yet - keep the idea in mind! 20...exd5 21.♖f6+ gxf6 22.♙xf6 h6+-). Black stops ♗g5 and remains up a piece.) 20...♗c2 (20...♗a3?? runs into 21.♖d3+-.) 21.♙d3 ♗xa2 Now the bishop on d3 also points menacingly at the kingside - can you really blame Warmerdam for hesitating here?





A) 22.♖c3 The discovered attack on h7 looks crushing, and Black might indeed feel the need to call an ambulance – but not for himself. 22...g6!-+ The counterattack on White's queen saves – and wins – the game.

B) 22.♗c1 The fact that Carissa both saw and intended this diabolical retreat from afar shows why she is destined to become a GM. The fact that she did not immediately spot the refutation shows why she is not a 3600-rated engine. Black's queen is trapped and ♖b2 is coming – what to do? 22...♗a6! Easy enough to find once you reach this position, since there is really no alternative, but remember that this line had to be foreseen several moves earlier. 23.♖b2 (23.♖d2 ♗xd3 24.♖xa2 ♗xb1-+) 23...♗xd3! (23...♗a3? 24.♗xa6 ♖xa6 25.♖b7+-) 24.♖xa2 ♗xe4 A total triumph for the minor pieces against the queen. Technically Black is down a point of material, but the knight on d5 is untouchable and fully justifies itself. Black's passed a-pawn will be well supported, and the position is both objectively excellent for Black and much easier to play. In practice, this should convert smoothly.

C) 22.♖d2! ♗a3 23.♗c4 Remarkably, White is still holding on here, despite being down two pawns and with Black to move. The threat is Ra2, and Black has several ways to respond. I won't bore you with dense variations, but the position is genuinely fascinating.

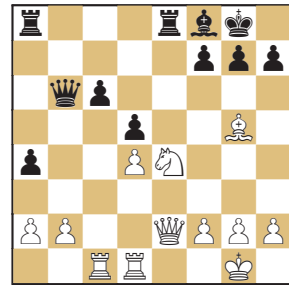
C1) 23...g6 24.♗h4 The aggressive option. (24.♗d1 is the safe option, aiming to collect the a4 pawn. 24...♗g7 25.♖a2 ♗f8 26.♖xa4=) 24...♗g7 25.♖d3 ♗f8 26.♖h3 h5 27.g4∞;

C2) 23...♗a6 24.♗xa6 (24.♖a2? ♖eb8! Black is also fine after 24...♗xc4, getting a rook and bishop for the queen, but this move is a cold shower, exploiting White's weak bank rank – remember when I said that would matter? Finally, a variation has appeared which proves me correct.) 24...♖xa6 25.♖b7 Threatening ♗xf7+, but that is easily met, right? 25...g6 26.♗e2! The a6 rook is attacked, and Black's

queen is still not entirely safe, with ♖d3 and trapping ideas persisting. Black has two moves that hold here – but I'll leave those for the reader to uncover.

20.♗xd5 ♗e2! A neat intermediate move, distracting White's queen. 20...exd5?? 21.♗f6+ gxf6 22.♗xf6 h6 23.♖c3+-.

21.♗xe2 exd5



Black regains the piece. Now Carissa must choose between a pawn-up endgame or a pleasant middlegame in which Black's kingside structure is shattered.

22.♗f6+! I prefer this option. 22.♗c2 ♖xe4 (22...dxe4 keeps the material, but concedes activity. 23.♗e3±) 23.♗xc6 ♗xc6 24.♖xc6 ♖b8 25.♖c2 White can press with the extra pawn, but Black's activity should suffice for a draw with correct play.

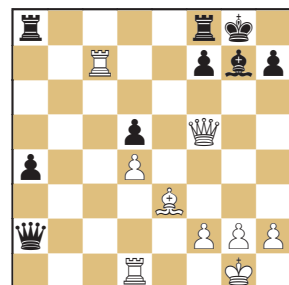
22...gxf6 23.♗e3 Material is equal, but Black's weakened king will be a long-term problem.

23...f5 Now ♗g4+ is prevented, and Black hopes to follow up with ...♗h6, trading bishops and easing the pressure.

24.♗h5! By now we know that Carissa has zero compassion for the b2 pawn, so the decision is easy.

24...♗xb2 25.♖xc6 ♗g7 25...♗xa2 26.♖c7.

26.♖c7 ♖f8 27.♗xf5 ♗xa2

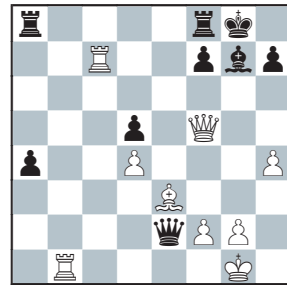


Allowing Black a dangerous passed pawn so close to queening takes courage, but the threats against Black's king take precedence.

28.h4 Some luft is essential, and the text also keeps the option of advancing the pawn further.

28...♖ab8? Black is now lost, although the road to survival was narrow.

28...♗e2 is a natural move, stepping out of the way of the passed pawn – but the follow-up is the tricky part. 29.♖b1



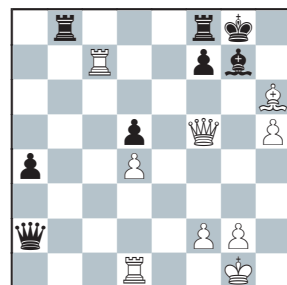
How should Black meet ♖bb7 and the devastation that follows?

29...♖ae8! The only move, distracting White with the idea of ...♖xe3. (29...♗a6 30.♖bb7 ♗f6 31.♗xd5 a3 White can choose between ♖xf7, exploiting the loose rook on a8, or the simple ♖a7.; 29...a3 Black's pawn will queen with check, but believe it or not – White can simply allow it. 30.♖bb7! a2 31.♖xf7 a1♗+ 32.♗h2 Black cannot stop mate. The prettiest line is the following: 32...♗h8 33.♗xh7+! ♗xh7 34.♖xg7+ ♗h8 35.♖h7+ ♗g8 36.♖bg7 mate.) 30.♖bb7 ♖xe3 31.♖xf7 (31.fxe3 ♗xe3+ 32.♗h2 ♗xd4) 31...♖e7! An outstanding defensive resource, hard to spot from afar. 32.♖fxe7 (32.♖bxe7?? ♗xe7) 32...♗d1+ 33.♗h2 ♖xf5 34.♖xg7+ ♗f8 35.♖gc7 ♗g8 36.♖g7+=.

29.h5! Now the landslide begins – the threat of h5-h6 forces concessions.

29...h6 29...♖b6 30.♖c8.

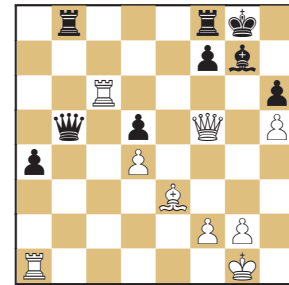
30.♖c6 Carissa's move wins cleanly, but I have to show a really unusual theme. 30.♗xh6! It is a really tough move to consider in the first place, but once you see it, the variations are straightforward.



30...♗xh6 31.♖c6 ♗g7 (31...♗g7 32.♗f6+-; 31...♗e2 32.♖xh6 ♗xd1+ 33.♗h2+-) 32.h6 ♗xd4 (32...♗h8 33.h7+ ♗g7 34.♗g5+ ♗xh7 35.♖h6 mate.) 33.♗g4+ ♗h7 34.♖xd4 ♗b1+ 35.♗h2 ♖g8 36.♗f3+-.

30...♗b3 31.♖a1 The a-pawn is firmly under control.

31...♗b5



32.♖xh6! The final blow – everything else comes easily.

32...♖fd8 32...♗xh6 33.♗xh6+-.

33.♖h7 ♗d7 34.♖xg7+! ♗xg7 35.h6+ ♗f8 36.♗f6 ♗e6 There are several winning paths now, but the game continuation is the simplest.

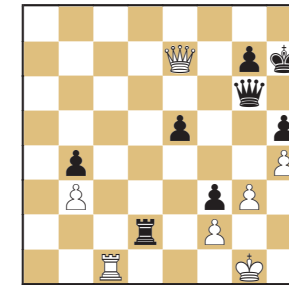
37.♗h8+ ♗e7 38.♗g5+ ♗d7 38...f6 39.♗g7+.

39.♗xd8 Black resigned, as after 39...♗xd8 40.♗g7 ♗g6 41.♗xg6 fxc6 42.♖xa4+-, the endgame is hopeless.

The final round was also a smooth performance, this time against the talented 16-year-old Lu Miaoyi from China.

Table with 2 columns: Name and Score. Lu Miaoyi 2438, Carissa Yip 2466

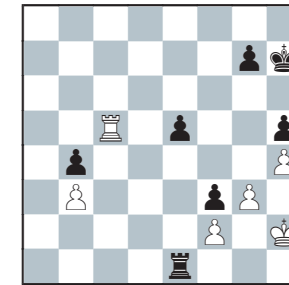
Tata Steel Challengers, Wijk aan Zee 2026



Black is totally dominant here, with an extra pawn and the safer king, and some nice geometry finishes the game off.

56...♗b6! Threatening ...♗xf2+, and all of White's defenses have a flaw.

57.♖c5 57.♗c5 ♗xc5 58.♖xc5 ♖d1+ 59.♗h2 ♖e1

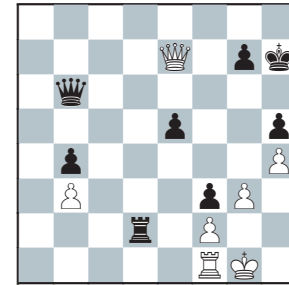


This endgame is totally lost for White, with her king encaged. Depending on how White proceeds, Black will have ideas of ...♖f1, or ...e4-e3.

60.♖b5 ♗g6! (60...e4?? There is no need to rush and hang the h5 pawn

with check. More importantly, White would then be able to play g4 and begin uncaging her king: 61.♖xh5+ ♗g6 62.g4 e3 63.♗g3.) 61.♖xb4 e4+- There is no defense against ...e4-e3.

57.♖f1 Perhaps the toughest defense, but Black has a nice hidden win.



57...♗b5! The only move, threatening ...♗xf1+ followed by ...♖d1 mate. 58.♖e1 (58.♖c1 ♖xf2! 59.♗xf2 ♗e2+ 60.♗g1 ♗g2 mate.) 58...♗e2! A beautiful sacrifice to break through. 59.♖xe2 fxe2 60.♗xe5 ♖d1+ 61.♗h2 e1♗ 62.♗xh5+ ♗g8+- The queen covers e8, so there is no perpetual.

57...♖d1+ 58.♗h2 ♖c1! This wins a rook and the game.

59.♗g5 59.♖xc1 ♗xf2+ 60.♗h3 ♗g2 mate. 59...♖xc5 60.♗xh5+ ♗h6

White resigned

Congratulations to the winners! I encourage everyone to check out the games from this tournament – you'll find, as I did, that it produced a wealth of fighting chess and fascinating ideas.

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